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The Nature of the Estimative Process

(Report Prepared for the CIA Subcommittee of
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Committee)

1. The procedures for preparing National Intelligence Estimates (NIE's) have the aim of bringing the totality of US intelligence resources to bear, at the right time and in the right form, on the problems confronting US foreign policy makers at the highest level. The National Security Act of 1947, in setting forth the duties of the Director of Central Intelligence, declared him responsible for preparing intelligence for the national security. His is therefore the primary role and responsibility in the preparation of these estimates. In carrying it out, he is assisted by a comparatively small organization within the CIA -- the Office of National Estimates -- and the combined resources of the entire intelligence community -- represented by the members of the United States Intelligence Board (USIB) and their respective organizations.*

* The USIB, chaired by the Director, is made up of the chief of the intelligence organization of the Department of State; the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense (Special Operations); the intelligence chiefs of the Departments of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and of the Joint Staff, and representatives of the AEC, the FBI, and the National Security Agency.

2. The USIB usually meets once weekly, more often if necessary, and its agenda normally includes consideration of at least one and often several draft NIE's. Once the USIB has approved an estimate, the document stands as the agreed view of the intelligence community, and is submitted by the Director of Central Intelligence to the National Security Council, the NSC Planning Board, and other consumers as appropriate.

3. Before an estimate reaches final consideration by the USIB it has received close attention in many agencies of the government, from its inception to the last stages of drafting and coordination. The machinery involved in the process is elaborate, but flexible. Coordinated estimates have been conceived and delivered in a matter of two or three hours on crisis situations arising, for example, out of the Suez war and the Hungarian revolt. These are called Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIE's). At the other extreme the annual comprehensive estimate on Soviet internal and external policies and prospects (a five year projection) requires many months of research, drafting and coordination -- within CIA and among the USIB agencies. The time and effort required for most estimates, whether on particular countries or other foreign policy problems, fall somewhere in between these extremes. The same is true of their length, which may be as short as one page for SNIE's on particular questions, or upwards of seventy-five pages for the annual Soviet estimate.

4. Whether an NIE is long or short, done hurriedly or at routine pace, the essentials of the procedure are as follows:

a. Inception. Requirements for most NIE's can be anticipated well in advance of the time when they are actually needed. The chief basis for scheduling these is the agenda of the NSC. Through close and continuing liaison, the Office of National Estimates is kept abreast of the projected work-load of the NSC and its staff for at least six months ahead, and the estimates schedule for the next half-year is reviewed and adjusted quarterly in accord with NSC needs. In addition, a number of estimates are also done at the request of one or another of the USIB agencies or at the desire of the Director or other CIA officials and components, including the Office of National Estimates.

b. Terms of Reference: the Cornerstone. Once an estimate has been scheduled, terms of reference are prepared by the Office of National Estimates, checked when necessary with members of the NSC staff, and agreed upon with representatives of the intelligence community -- if necessary in a formal meeting. This document becomes the cornerstone of the estimate. It defines the problem precisely, indicates scope and focus, assigns primary responsibilities for research and analysis to the appropriate agencies, and sets the schedule. In the case of special estimates done on a crash basis, this step can be eliminated in favor of informal contacts which serve essentially the same purposes.

c. Contributions: the role of the USIB agencies. Contributions represent the raw material of the estimate -- prepared by experts in the agencies and in CIA, often after securing needed information from embassies and stations in the field. They include information on pertinent political, economic, military and scientific or other questions and speculative analysis on trends and developments to come. Through the medium of these contributions, every organization in the intelligence community is enabled to bring to bear what it knows and can find out about knowable aspects of the problem at hand; and, to estimate or speculate about the unknowable -- those questions on which hard intelligence is unavailable or those questions about future developments of concern to US policy.

d. Preparation of the Estimate: The Role of the Office of National Estimates (ONE). Once contributions have been received from the USIB agencies, the field, and appropriate offices of CIA

itself, it is ONE's task to assess and digest the material, take note of inconsistencies in evidence of views, spot any gaps in needed information, and draft the estimate in the form and with the content most useful to the consumer. It is up to ONE to try to fill any gaps in information by further tapping of intelligence resources and to resolve, at least to its own satisfaction, any differences of opinion between contributing agencies on important matters. In almost all cases, the process calls for boiling down a fairly large body of information and speculation into a comparatively short statement of the essentials -- both of relevant facts and estimates. Drafts are prepared initially by the Staff in ONE, and reviewed for substance, reasoning, consistency, and form by the Board of National Estimates -- a group of senior CIA officials of wide experience and background in intelligence and other fields -- military and civilian. The Board's task is to see that the draft responds as fully as possible to consumer needs, and that in any matters at contest, a sound position is taken.

e. Working Level Coordination: ONE and the Agencies.
When a draft NIE leaves ONE, it represents, therefore, the position which the Board of National Estimates feels that the Director of Central Intelligence should take. The next stage is to see that it also represents the best possible view of the intelligence community as a whole -- and if not, what the differences are and where the best estimate of the truth lies. After the ONE draft has been studied and checked by experts in the USIB agencies, representatives of these agencies meet with the Board of National Estimates for coordination of the paper. Meetings are chaired by a Board member who has been in charge of the paper from the beginning. It is the business of these coordination sessions to go over the paper paragraph by paragraph, correcting any factual errors, setting aright matters of color, emphasis and tone, and trying to reach agreement on the key estimates in the document.

f. Coordination: Consensus, Compromise and Dissent.
The business of reaching an agreed estimate is not one of horse trading between conflicting interests and opinions or of finding the blandest and lowest common denominator. For one thing, in the nature of the process, all responsible participants have or get access to the same body of evidence and are seeking to answer the same essential questions. (In many, indeed most, of the critical estimative issues, a consensus of informed opinion is not difficult to achieve. There are, of course, occasional questions of interpretation or judgement on which differences of opinion will persist

even among reasonable men and experienced specialists reasoning together over the same body of evidence. Obviously, the policy-maker is not well served by an estimate in which every such difference of opinion, no matter how slight or esoteric, is conscientiously made a matter of record. Thus disagreements on non-essential matters are frequently settled by compromise -- but only on non-essential matters.

It is a highly important function of the Board of National Estimates member in the chair to see that this distinction is respected. For just as dissents on minor matters would impair the usefulness of an NIE, so failure to note a real difference of opinion on vital matters would constitute a real disservice. Where such disagreements exist -- they are not frequent but are by definition significant -- it is important that they be crisply defined and that a dissent by an agency confront the issue squarely and with relevant argumentation.

g. Final Coordination: the USIB. When the draft of an NIE, coordinated at the working level, comes to the USIB, it has reached the final step. In cases where there are no outstanding dissents, final approval is often quickly gotten -- though frequently one or several of the USIB members will raise questions, challenge judgments or propose additions to a paper arising out of his own review of the working level draft. A more serious problem arises, of course, where differences of opinion have not been reconciled during the process so far, and the USIB members must settle the question or agree to disagree formally. The accepted rules for deciding such questions at this level are the same as at the earlier stage; everyone acknowledges the desirability of an agreed estimate, dissents on minor matters are unwelcome and largely avoided, and disagreements on major matters should be made clear and explained fully. To assist in settling such issues, USIB members usually have present the experts or representatives who sat for them during the coordination meeting(s), and ONE is always represented by its Assistant Director for National Estimates as well as the particular Board and Staff members responsible for the estimate.

h. Subsidiary issuances. Two documents, usually prepared and coordinated in connection with an NIE, deserve brief mention: the Validity Study and the Post-Mortem. Both are efforts at analysis of past performance and guideposts to improvement on the part of the intelligence community. The validity study, prepared in ONE and reviewed

and approved when the estimate is, amounts to a critical look at the past estimative record on the key questions considered in the estimate being completed. The post-mortem is a statement of what intelligence deficiencies (and strengths) were experienced in the course of doing the estimate just completed. Both are efforts at analysing the strengths and weaknesses of estimates on key subjects -- and both are designed to bring authoritatively to the members of the intelligence community, in Washington and in the field, where there is need for improvement.

5. The Final Product: What MIE's Are: Considering the importance and magnitude of the topics, and the policy problems on which they bear, MIE's are extremely brief documents. Making them so is one of the minor arts involved in the process. They are not small encyclopedic treatises on the problem or country concerned, but a distillation of the essential -- whether relevant facts, educated speculation on situations where the facts can only partly be known, or assessments and estimates of future developments. Perhaps the most informative way of ending this discussion is to conclude with a brief list of characteristic estimates and types of estimates commonly prepared in a given year. Total production of MIE's and SME's usually runs to over 60 a year. A few examples selected from the 1960 list will serve to illustrate the range:

A. Regularly Scheduled Estimates

- (1) Main Trends in Soviet Capabilities and Policies, 1960-1965
- (2) Sino-Soviet Relations
- (3) Problems Affecting the North Atlantic Alliance

- (4) Soviet Capabilities in Guided Missiles
- (5) The Outlook for the UAR
- (6) The Outlook for India
- (7) Estimate of the World Situation

B. Special National Intelligence Estimates

- (1)
- (2) The Off-Shore Islands
- (3) Probable Communist Intentions in Laos
- (4) The Soviet Attitude and Tactics on the Berlin Problem

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